

NORA
BONESTEEL'S
CHRISTMAS
PAST

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a novel approach to faith

Nora Bonesteel's Christmas Past
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Well, it just doesn't seem right, that's all. Arresting somebody on Christmas Eve." Spencer Arrowood shivered as a gust of wind hit him. The fleece-lined glove he had just dug out of the pocket of his non-regulation sheepskin coat spun away from his numb fingers and landed with a little plop in a not-yet-frozen mud puddle beside the curb. With a weary sigh, the sheriff picked it up and flicked at the mud with his hand. "By rights, we ought to be heading home by now."

"Home," Deputy Joe LeDonne shrugged. "Yeah, but it'll be quiet after this, and both the second shift officers have kids. I figured we might as well let them have the night off."

Martha has gone to visit her sister in Charlotte, so I got no plans. You?”

The sheriff cast a baleful glance to the pewter sky that seemed to stop just above the spire of the courthouse. A few grubby flakes of snow swirled along on the gusts of wind. “Plans? None to speak of. But a few upstanding citizens have invited me to Christmas parties, so I reckoned I’d fetch up somewhere this evening. Maybe make the rounds of three or four of them, and make dinner out of the party tray hors d’oeuvres.”

“Shall I reserve the drunk tank, Sheriff?”

“Not on my account. I’m sticking to fruit punch.”

“Well, good luck with the party circuit. Do any of the invitations sound promising?”

“Well, not for the pleasure of anybody’s company, as far as I’m concerned, but there is one from Anna Martha Matuszczyk Kerney.” He said the name in one long breath.

“What a mouthful. How did you remember all that?”

Spencer sighed. “It was on the check she wrote for my re-election campaign. I memorized it in case I ever met her. She is the widow of the quarry owner, so I reckon she can

afford chocolate-covered quail eggs, or whatever they serve at those fancy parties.”

“Champagne and caviar.” LeDonne bit back a smile. “Sounds just like your kind of party. You can talk about polo and opera. You gonna change into your tux back at the office?”

Spencer shook his head. “If I had one, they’d probably mistake me for a waiter. And since caviar is just a jumped-up name for fish eggs, maybe I should stick with pigs-in-a-blanket and the vegetable tray and onion dip from Food City.”

“You always do,” said LeDonne. “Our office Christmas party makes up in consistency what it lacks in creativity. But I do look forward to your mother’s chocolate cake every year.”

“Clabbered sky,” said Spencer, peering up at the clouds. “Looks like it’s going to snow here before too long.”

The decades-old tinsel and ribbon Christmas decorations, put up by the town of Hamelin on the first Monday in December, swayed in the wind. The narrow main street was empty now; the few little shops closed at noon on Christmas Eve. Anybody with last-minute shopping to do would have headed for Johnson City where the big chain stores never closed at all. Everyone else had gone home to snug brick

houses on tree-lined streets, or to one of the farmhouses scattered across the valley beneath the dark ridge of mountains, with Christmas trees shining in the living room windows and log fires blazing brightly in the fireplaces.

There was a Christmas tree at the little white house on Elm Avenue, where Spencer's mother still lived; he had bought it and put it up for her two weeks before, but he had not bothered to get one for his own place. He was seldom home, anyhow. LeDonne wouldn't have one, either. He avoided anything with overtones of sentiment, good or bad. The few Christmas cards he received, mostly from local insurance agents and car dealers, went straight in the trash. In any case, he was right: there was no need for either of them to hurry home.

LeDonne slid into the driver's seat of the patrol car. "Well, then, we'd best get it over with before the storm hits. I've already got the warrant. Get in."

The sheriff pulled on the worn leather gloves and wound an old silk aviator scarf around his neck before he took his place in the passenger seat. "It'll be dark in a couple of hours, too. In case this expedition makes me miss the Christmas parties, I hope we can find some place open for supper. I hadn't

even finished my sweet potato pie when you hauled me out of Dent's. I suppose this little mission of yours will take us to the back of beyond?"

LeDonne grunted, unmoved by his boss's litany of complaints. "You ought to thank me. I'll bet those party invitations all came from local bureaucrats, and you know you'd hate every minute you had to spend with them. You'd never get enough to eat from the hors d'oeuvres trays, and you might even break your rule and drink too much just to be able to stand the company. So consider this warrant your Christmas gift."

Spencer laughed and caught the folded sheaf of papers the deputy tossed to him. After all the years he and Joe LeDonne had worked together, the deputy knew him well. There was no sense in arguing with the truth. Spencer would have hated those parties. Glad-handing was his least favorite part of the job, and he dreaded every political year as if he were facing a murder trial instead of re-election.

"All right, but this had better not be a wild goose chase on account of some silly misdemeanor. I'm not jailing a litterbug or a jaywalker tonight. Christmas Eve." He unfolded

the papers, squinting at the fine print. “Left my reading glasses back on my desk,” he muttered. “Does that say Shull?”

“That’s right. J. D. Shull. And he’s no jaywalker, either.”

“Address says Route One. That’s out past Dark Hollow.” Spencer saw a blank space in the jumble of scrawled writing. “And there’s not a phone listing for him, either. No surprise there. I swear that part of the county is only on the map two days a week.”

LeDonne did not smile. Because he had not grown up in this place, acquainted with, or kin to half the county, as Spencer Arrowood was, LeDonne did not share the sheriff’s inclination to be friendly to strangers. He gave the benefit of the doubt to no one. The way he saw it, his job was to execute that warrant, and to bring in whomever the court had told him to fetch. If there was a misunderstanding to be sorted out, or any justice or mercy to be dispensed, that was someone else’s responsibility, not part of his duties. He would bring in the prisoner they asked for, and whatever happened after that was not his concern.

“So what did this J. D. Shull do that’s so all-fired important that we have to haul him in on Christmas Eve?—And if you

tell me he bounced a check, I'm going to be out of this car at the next stop sign."

"Warrant says hit and run. He smashed into a car in Knoxville and took off, but somebody got the plate number. Knoxville wants him brought in."

"Anybody killed?"

"Nobody even hurt."

Spencer heaved a weary sigh, and shook his head. "Then why in Sam Hill do we have to go out and haul him in on Christmas Eve?"

"That car he hit? It was a Mercedes belonging to the wife of Senator Robertson."



"And we thought that instead of going back to Florida at Thanksgiving, we would just stay at our place in the mountains and spend Christmas here. Because Christmas has become so commercial in recent years, don't you find?"

Nora Bonesteel smiled politely at her occasional neighbor, Shirley Haverty, who was perched on the chintz sofa in front

of Nora's fireplace, attempting to balance a tea-cup with her silver-lacquered fingernails—they used to be talons, but she'd been forced to trim them when she took up gardening. Shirley had turned up on the doorstep half an hour earlier, resplendent in a turquoise velour tracksuit and rhinestone-studded running shoes. She carried a red-ribboned poinsettia from Food City as a holiday gift for her elderly neighbor, in hopes of making her visit seem like a social call.

Nora didn't see Shirley Haverty very often. For more than half of each year, the Havertys lived in Florida, but a few years back, for reasons that were never quite clear to Nora, they had purchased the old farmhouse down the road from her to use as their summer residence. That house, the closest thing Ashe Mountain had to a mansion, was still an imposing structure despite its age and the years it had been neglected.

The Havertys seemed pleasant enough, always waving when they drove past if she was working out in her flower garden, but aside from such casual neighborly gestures, their lives did not touch at any point, and Nora seldom gave them much thought.

Now, though, here was Shirley Haverty, perched on the old

sofa in her parlor like an exotic bird, casting about for topics of conversation. In fact, an exotic bird was exactly what she reminded Nora of. Down past the old barn there was a pond, usually occupied by a few white farm ducks and an occasional itinerant mallard, but during the spring and autumn bird migrations, more exotic creatures, heading to or from their winter nesting grounds, would make rest stops in the ponds and streams all along the path of the mountains, which they used as a celestial Warriors Path to guide them on their seasonal north/south journeys. At such times, a regal blue heron—Nora thought it might always be the same one—stopped in the duck pond in the same week of every April and October. It was a magical-looking creature with legs like corn stalks and smoky blue-gray feathers, just the color of the distant mountains at twilight. The heron would stay around the pond for a few days, resting from its long flight and scarfing down whatever fish it could find, and then it would take wing again, heading for the southern tropics in autumn or the austere woodlands of Canada in spring. It never stayed long, and it never took any notice of the local waterfowl, dwarfed by its size and eclipsed by its magnificence. The shabby, earthbound

farm ducks would huddle together at the edge of the pond, gaping at the lordly newcomer as if he were a visiting prince. They never challenged the heron or confronted it at all, and it ignored them as if they were no more than rocks at the water's edge. The pond ducks simply waited in strained silence until the heron decided to leave again, and then things settled back to normal as if he had never been there at all.

The summer people were like that. They showed up for a little while each year, aloof and exotic, mostly taking no notice of the local community, and then one day they'd be gone again. Their presence didn't trouble Nora. Their paths rarely crossed, because the summer people didn't show up in church, and Nora did not frequent the outlet mall or the wine and cheese parties favored by her erstwhile neighbors. The locals who became acquainted with them were mostly those who had to: the plumbers, the carpenters, the cabinetmakers.

Nora might have gone on peacefully coexisting and serenely unaware of the Havertys' existence, except that early in the summer, Shirley Haverty had decided to take up gardening.

Inspired by a lecture on local plant lore she had attended down at the college, a course open to the general community,

Shirley had come away enchanted with the idea of creating art with landscaping. She had hopes of making the dull and ordinary front yard of their summer place into a haven for native plants and wildflowers. The accompanying slide show depicting such a garden had been inspiring in a general way, but time and a barrage of questions had prevented the lecturer from going into detail about just how to accomplish this feat. But Shirley was inspired; shortly after that lecture she had started asking around for local guidance in native gardening, and somewhere between the local nursery and the farmers' market, one of the local residents had told her about Nora Bonesteel.

A few days later Shirley had showed up on the doorstep of Nora's white-frame house one morning in a scarf-tied straw hat, yellow polo shirt and khaki shorts, and espadrilles. She had handed Nora a personal check and a gift basket of soaps and lotions from the mall's bath and body store, and announced, "I have come so that you can teach me how to garden."

Still bemused at this unsubtle encounter, Nora told this story a few days later to her old friend Jane Arrowood, who stopped in for tea.

Jane's eyes widened. "And you let her in? Did you really? I think I would have torn up the check in her face, thrown the gift basket back at her, and pushed her off the porch."

Nora smiled. "Well, I never did cash the check. It's in the drawer of the lamp table. But I might use the soaps she brought; I'm partial to the smell of lavender. I am also partial to gardening, and I decided it wouldn't do any harm to listen to what the woman wanted. Perhaps we owe it to the world to teach others some of what we know. Anyhow, it is kind of a tradition around here, if you think about it. Remember Lydia Bean?"

Jane nodded. "Tennessee history. If my memory of eighth grade doesn't fail me, Lydia Bean was a young settler's wife, kidnapped from around here by a Cherokee war party in the late 1700s, and they were getting ready to burn her at the stake, when the tribe's wise woman intervened."

"Yes. Her rescuer was the famous *Ghighbau*, Nancy Ward. They say she stamped out the fire herself, and saved Mrs. Bean's life by making her promise to teach the Cherokee women how to make butter and cheese. The captive agreed, of course, and after a few weeks' instruction, they let her go home."

“Well, I wouldn’t put it past the summer people to start burning us at the stake,” sighed Jane, “but I think they see it the other way around. They seem to think *we’re* the savages. Anyhow, they’re intent on taking our land, which makes me feel like a Cherokee anyhow. But it’s one thing to teach folks a skill in order to escape a bonfire, and quite another to do it for a basket of perfumed soap and hand lotion.”

Nora smiled. “Oh, it wasn’t that, Jane. I chalked my teaching her up to Christian charity. It turns out Shirley Haverty is not a bad sort once you get to know her, and, besides, I’d like to see an old-fashioned garden at the Honeycutt place again. It used to be so pretty there when I was a girl.”

The Honeycutts had been gone for decades, the older generation dead, and the younger ones married, moved away, and now elderly themselves, but local people still called the sprawling two-story place in a meadow on Ashe Mountain “the Honeycutts’ house,” even though almost no one now remembered the original owners. Nora did, though. She remembered summer ice cream parties on the lawn—made with cream from the neighbors’ cows and fresh berries picked from the bushes down by the creek, all packed together with salt and

ice in a hand-cranked contraption that seemed to take forever, but it made the best ice cream she'd ever tasted.

The Honeycuts. How long ago that was.

In other seasons, there had been neighborhood dances sometimes in the big parlor. A few of the young people danced, while Judge Honeycutt and a couple of other neighbors played fiddle and mandolin—old tunes, like “Shady Grove” and “Down by the Willow Garden” —none of that new jitterbug or jazz music you could hear on the radio back then. The judge did not approve of the newfangled dance crazes. He was a kind man, though, and now and then when times were hard and crops had suffered from the weather, many a family up on the mountain had found a bag of store-bought necessities on their doorstep, or a box of homemade jams and canned beans from Miss Ida's pantry. He never offered those gifts in person, though, for it would have embarrassed both the giver and the receiver to be caught in the act of charity.

Judge Honeycutt had died after a long, full life, just on the eve of the election of President Kennedy. Nora had mourned his passing, along with the rest of the community, but years later looking back on it, she thought it might have been fitting

that his end had come in conjunction with the era he had belonged to. His gentle old-fashioned ways were not suited to the brash modern world, and the judge would have been saddened to live on as a stranger in a harsher time. Miss Ida had followed her husband to the grave a couple of winters later, and the house went to their last surviving son. Two sons had died in infancy, and the older boy was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. Seven years later, the last surviving son, Rob, had left home to serve in the Korean War. While he was in the army, he had met and married a girl “from away,” and attended a Pennsylvania college on the G.I. bill. By the time Rob Honeycutt inherited the house, his life was firmly rooted elsewhere, and so the place stayed vacant year after year, with just a local handyman around to see to its upkeep. After perhaps a decade of this, the younger Honeycutts—strangers to the mountains—felt no attachment to the old home place, and the house was sold. Since then it had passed through a number of tenants and owners, until finally the Havertys bought it, hoping to restore the property to its former glory.

The Honeycutt place was a white farmhouse three-stories high—not small or inexpensive, but spare and of simple

design. Set between the blacktopped country road and the forest behind it, it nestled in a meadow below the sharp ridge of the mountain. A dry stone wall lined the gravel driveway, and the covered porch was sheltered by old lilac bushes growing untrimmed and untended on either side of the front steps.

“I was glad for the chance to speak to her about gardens,” Nora told Jane Arrowood. “They have been making changes to the house, painting it and putting in picture windows, and so on, and before they got around to rearranging the yard, I wanted to tell her how many years it takes for lilacs to reach that size.”

Jane nodded. “Longer than any of us would live to see them get that big. Cutting them down would be a sin. Did she listen?”

“Oh, yes. She seemed pleased to be told.”

“Well, then,” said Jane, “You’ll probably save some lives.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, those new people haven’t any notion at all of what plants will grow up here, and the ones I know are always sending away for camellias and trying to plant ficus hedges, which work very well five hundred miles southeast of here, but three

thousand feet up in east Tennessee, they just fall over dead.” She smiled. “I suppose it would be a kindness for you to spare the life of a few helpless camellias, though no doubt these summer people can afford any amount of replacements.”

“I expect they could. When she gave me that check, she didn’t have any notion at all that she might be giving offense, and I didn’t want to hurt her feelings by correcting her. She’s right about the garden, though. Now that they are restoring the house, the grounds do need to be tended as well, and the garden should be in keeping with the house.”

“As opposed to—say—a cactus garden?” Jane smiled and shook her head. *Summer people.*

Nora nodded. “Yes, I’d like to see the old plants restored to the Honeycutts’ garden, and that wouldn’t happen unless somebody gave the present owner some advice. I suppose I’m doing it in memory of the Honeycutts as much as anything. The judge and Miss Ida were fine people, and they loved that house.

“Anyhow, I don’t mind telling her what plants she’ll need and how to take care of them. I even gave her some cuttings and extra bedding plants from here to get her started, and she’s

good about doing the digging and planting herself. I might have been less accommodating if she had intended to hire a gardener, and sit back while somebody else did all the work. But she wants to landscape the place herself—said the exercise was good for her heart—and I'd like to see her get it right.”

Jane Arrowood shook her head. “No good deed goes unpunished, Nora. I hope you don't end up with a yard full of summer people in golf shorts and running shoes, all wanting you to supervise their lawn projects. Even Lydia Bean only spent a few weeks instructing the Cherokee women. I doubt you'd get off that lightly.”

Nora twisted her hands in her lap. “Well, you're right about that, Jane. Things have already taken a turn I hadn't quite bargained for.”

“What do you mean?”

“Shirley Haverty stopped by again this morning. She was so agitated I could barely make out what the matter was, and it wasn't gardening that had set her off.”

“Why, what happened?”

“She claims the house is haunted.”